Countries Where the Bible Is Banned or Restricted

LegalClarity Team

No single list of “Bible-banning countries” captures the full picture, because the legal reality ranges from outright criminalization of possession (North Korea) to softer but still serious restrictions on printing, importing, or distributing the text. North Korea is the starkest example: owning a Bible there can lead to life in a prison camp or execution. Beyond that extreme, a handful of countries criminalize distribution or importation, and a larger group funnels all Bible access through state-controlled channels that make the book difficult or impossible to obtain legally.

North Korea

North Korea is the closest thing to a total Bible ban anywhere in the world. The country’s criminal code punishes anyone who “without authorization, imports, makes, distributes, or illegally keeps” unapproved foreign media, and the government treats religious materials as a direct threat to its political system. According to the NGO Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, possession of religious materials brought in from abroad is punishable by imprisonment or execution. Citizens are actively encouraged to report anyone found with religious material, and officials deliver regular warnings in public meetings not to read Bibles and to turn in anyone who owns one.

The punishments are not theoretical. Documented cases include a family sentenced to life in a political prison camp after authorities discovered they possessed a Bible, a Korean Workers’ Party member executed at an airfield in front of thousands for having one, and defector testimony describing two people executed for Bible possession in 2018. Christians who manage to practice do so with materials dating back to the early twentieth century, kept hidden and passed quietly among small groups of believers.

Countries That Criminalize Bible Distribution

Several countries stop short of criminalizing private possession but make it illegal to distribute, import, or publicly use a Bible. The practical effect is that Bibles are extremely difficult to obtain and anyone caught sharing one faces serious

consequences.

Somalia makes Islam the state religion and bans the propagation of any other faith. Proselytizing is illegal, and while the provisional constitution technically provides for the right to practice one's religion, it also requires all laws to comply with sharia. Converting from Islam is socially unacceptable and, in areas controlled by al-Shabaab, potentially fatal. The militant group has executed people suspected of converting to Christianity and has characterized foreign peacekeepers as "Christian crusaders." The small Christian community worships in secret house churches, and distributing Bibles would amount to illegal propagation of a non-Islamic religion.

Libya criminalizes proselytizing to Muslims and has prosecuted people for distributing Bibles. Authorities have historically been tolerant of non-Arabic religious materials for personal use, but Arabic-language Bibles and Christian literature have been confiscated. In one case, a Ghanaian national spent eight years in prison after receiving Arabic tracts containing biblical quotations. A South Korean pastor and his assistant were also arrested on proselytizing charges. The legal risk falls heaviest on anyone distributing materials in Arabic or openly sharing the faith with Muslim citizens.

Countries That Heavily Restrict Bible Access

A larger group of countries does not outright ban the Bible but controls access so tightly that obtaining one legally is difficult, sometimes nearly impossible for ordinary people.

China

China forbids private publishing of religious materials and restricts Bible production to state-licensed enterprises. The Nanjing Amity Printing Company prints Chinese-language Bibles for officially recognized religious organizations, and those copies are supposed to be distributed internally within registered churches. Printing Bibles for overseas clients requires provincial-level approval, and the finished products must be exported rather than sold domestically. Online Bible sales have faced periodic crackdowns. The case of house church pastor Cai Zhuohua illustrates the stakes: in 2005, he and two family members were sentenced to prison terms of up to three years and fined up to 150,000 yuan (roughly $20,000) for printing and distributing Bibles without government permission.

Brunei

Brunei prohibits proselytizing by any group other than the official Shafi'i school of Islam and places strict customs controls on importing non-Islamic religious texts, including Bibles. Materials intended for sale or distribution are blocked at the border. Christians in Brunei can practice privately but face significant barriers to obtaining physical copies of scripture through normal channels.

Malaysia

Malaysia's restrictions center on language and religious identity rather than a blanket ban. A 1986 government directive banned non-Muslims from using the word "Allah," which is the standard term for God in Malay-language Bibles. In 2021, a High Court ruled that directive unconstitutional, finding that Malay-speaking Christians in East Malaysia had used the word for generations. However, the government appealed the ruling, and state religious councils in several regions sought to join the appeal, leaving the legal status unresolved. Authorities have also required Malay-language Bibles to carry a "Not for Muslims" stamp and have seized Bibles containing the word "Allah."

Maldives

The Maldives restricts the importation of non-Islamic religious materials under its Islamic legal framework. Bringing Bibles into the country is treated as an offense, and no complete Bible translation exists in the native Dhivehi language. The country maintains Islam as the sole legal religion for citizens.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan requires all imported religious literature to undergo a mandatory "theological expert examination" before it can be distributed. Only registered religious associations may import religious texts, and they must receive a positive conclusion from the state review. The sole exception is a narrow personal-use allowance: one copy of each item for individual use, which does not require the theological review. This system gives the government effective veto power over which religious texts circulate in the country and in what quantities.

Vietnam

Vietnam channels all religious publishing through state-controlled entities. All publishers must be licensed public entities or state-owned enterprises, and every

document requires prior government approval. By decree, only the Religious Publishing House may publish religious books, though enforcement is uneven. A religious group must achieve formal government “Recognition” before it is allowed to publish religious texts at all. Decree 95, issued in late 2023, added new requirements for religious organizations receiving foreign funding and detailed registration procedures that groups must navigate before engaging in publishing or other religious activities.

Russia

Russia’s restrictions target specific editions rather than the Bible broadly. In 2017, a court in the border town of Vyborg banned the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, labeling it extremist material. The case originated in 2015 when customs officials impounded a shipment of the books from Finland on suspicion of extremism. Russia has since banned the Jehovah’s Witnesses organization entirely, making possession of their version of the Bible legally risky. Mainstream Bible editions remain legal, but the precedent of using “extremism” laws against a biblical translation is notable.

Saudi Arabia: A Common Misconception

Saudi Arabia appears on nearly every list of “countries where the Bible is banned,” but the reality is more nuanced than its reputation suggests. Public practice of any religion other than Islam is prohibited, and distributing non-Muslim religious materials or proselytizing is illegal. The religious police historically enforced these rules aggressively. However, the government officially allows religious materials for personal use, and customs officials do not have the authority to confiscate personal religious items. According to U.S. State Department reporting, travelers have been able to bring personal Bibles, crosses, and other religious materials into the country without difficulty. The danger in Saudi Arabia is not in owning a Bible quietly but in sharing it publicly or using it to evangelize.

Where Blasphemy and Apostasy Laws Create Danger

Some countries do not ban the Bible directly but have blasphemy or apostasy laws that turn Bible-related activity into a criminal matter. The distinction matters: the book itself may be legal, but using it, sharing it, or being seen with it can trigger prosecution under broader religious laws.

Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, particularly Section 295-B and 295-C of its Penal

Code, criminalize defiling the Quran and insulting the Prophet Muhammad. While Bible possession is not illegal, the blasphemy framework has ensnared Christians. In one documented case, a Christian couple was charged with blasphemy for posting Bible verses on social media. Accusations often come from personal disputes rather than genuine religious offenses, and the consequences are severe: charges can carry the death penalty, and defendants frequently face mob violence before their cases reach trial.

Sudan illustrates how persecution can function like a ban even when no specific law forbids Bible ownership. The former al-Bashir regime imposed sharia-based law on all citizens and systematically destroyed churches, arrested religious leaders, and confiscated religious properties. Though the apostasy law making renouncement of Islam punishable by death was formally scrapped in 2020, enforcement on the ground barely changed. As recently as 2022, authorities charged four young men from the Sudanese Baptist Church with apostasy after finding them praying, confiscated their Bibles, and reportedly tortured them in police custody. More than 165 churches have closed since the civil war began, and both warring factions have targeted Christian sites. The Bible is not technically illegal to own, but possessing one as a convert from Islam invites the kind of attention that can be life-threatening.

Why Countries Restrict the Bible

The motivations behind these restrictions tend to cluster into a few patterns, though they often overlap within a single country.

- **State ideology:** North Korea views all religion as a competitor to the political cult of personality surrounding its leaders. Any text offering an alternative worldview, let alone an alternative object of devotion, is treated as a security threat.
- **Protection of a dominant faith:** Countries like Somalia, Brunei, and the Maldives frame their restrictions as safeguarding Islam from outside influence. Laws against proselytizing and importing non-Islamic texts serve this purpose.
- **State control over civil society:** China and Vietnam do not object to Christianity itself so much as to any organized activity outside government oversight. Controlling Bible publication and distribution is part of a broader strategy to keep religious communities dependent on state-approved structures.

- **Perceived threat to social cohesion:** Malaysia's "Allah" dispute reflects a fear that shared religious vocabulary could blur the boundaries between Muslim and Christian communities in a multiethnic society. Kazakhstan's theological review requirement serves a similar gatekeeping function.

These motivations rarely exist in isolation. Saudi Arabia's restrictions combine protection of Islam with political control. Sudan's persecution of Christians blends religious ideology with ethnic conflict. The common thread is that governments treat independent access to religious texts as something that needs to be managed rather than guaranteed.

What Travelers Should Know

Travelers carrying Bibles into restrictive countries face risks that vary enormously depending on the destination, the language of the Bible, and the quantity. A single English-language Bible in personal luggage will pass through Saudi customs without incident but could land you in a North Korean prison camp. A box of Arabic Bibles shipped to Libya is a criminal matter. Kazakhstan explicitly allows one copy per item for personal use without its mandatory theological review, suggesting that carrying a single copy is generally safe there, but bringing multiple copies would require going through an official religious association.

If you are detained abroad for possessing or distributing religious materials, U.S. consular officers can visit you, provide reading materials and hygiene items where permitted, and request that officials allow visits from clergy of your choosing. They cannot, however, override local laws or secure your release. The most practical advice is to research the specific laws of your destination before traveling, carry only what you need for personal devotion, and understand that "personal use" is the legal line that most countries draw, even restrictive ones. Crossing it, whether by carrying multiple copies, distributing materials, or engaging in conversations that local authorities interpret as proselytizing, is where the real legal danger begins.

Original Link: https://legalclarity.org/in-which-countries-is-the-bible-banned/